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## CHAPTER VII

## DEATH AND ITS ATTENDANT CEREMONIES

761 Death is an event which every Kol knows must be faced relatively early in life. One does not find a high proportion of aged Kols.[1] Among many primitive people death is usually ascribed to evil influences, but among the Kols this does not seem to be the common belief. While they believe that some deaths may be ascribed to evil influences they do not believe that all are caused that way. On the whole they take quite a natural view of the phenomenon. What the gods will that they do. Death also may be due only to natural causes or carelessness and no hidden malevolent cause is assumed. Death is usually deserved, for as one sows he also reaps. Hence an early death may be justly merited and caused by corrupt living. The Kols do not seem to be as superstition ridden as many groups are, yet we found [771] indications that they hold the general local village point of view. On the whole there is a wholesome attitude toward the supernatural—the world is not altogether evil.

763 THE APPROACH OF DEATH. When it is clear that a person is about to die there are certain things which ought to be done. It was found that the custom of bringing a cow to the bedside of the dying man is known and is occasionally practiced. The dying man is asked to take [825 782] hold of her tail. This will help him to get to heaven, for the cow is now considered an offering to God, and it is held that by holding the tail the ● [771 778] dying man makes this offering. If available, he is also made to drink a little Ganges water which is regarded as the very best of drinks to give him at that hour. Failing this, a sip of water in which gold has been washed [823] is efficacious. Gold is considered an incarnation of God and a symbol of purity. Again, some ordinary water into which some ground up leaves [824] of the *tulasi* plant (*Ocymum sanctum*) have been thrown is advantageous. Such drinks are said to purify the dying person and prepare the soul for its flight to other worlds. Hindu influences are apparent.

Usually the person who is dying is placed on the ground to expire. The body is placed on the ground so that there may be close contact with Mother Earth. In some places it is said that a man may just as well die

[162 171] 1 This holds for primitive tribes in general, although any statement of age is unreliable. The 1931 census figures show that among the Kols there were only 100 men and 99 women per mile over forty. Other tribes show the following: Gond 154 men and 156 women; Maria 102 and 97; Baiga 143 and 148. Hindus rank higher—171 and 173 for Brahmins and 196 and 193 for Kunbis. *Census of India*, 1931, xii: 1, p. 131.

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If, during a worship period, a *haus* does not come when it should be expected, ashes are sprinkled over the worshipper. Probably some demon is near, and the spirit of the *devi* will not enter as long as a *bhut* is about, and this will frighten him away. A person who is ill, or who is facing some danger, may come, make an offering, and sprinkle ashes over himself, saying the magical words *"ochha, ochha."*

11. *A Grass Bundle* (*Chhahur*). This is the magic grass, and provides shade, shelter, and protection to *devis*. The *chhahur* is composed of stalks of wheat or some other sacred grass like *kans* (*Saccharum spontaneum*), *kusa* (*Poa cynosuroides*) or *urai* (*Vetivera zizanoides*) tied in a bundle to the end of a bamboo stick. These bits of grass are taken from thatch roofs of the houses in the village, usually one stalk from each house. Thus each house honours the deity and will therefore be protected. At times of smallpox or cholera this is a very effective procedure, and one or two stalks are brought from each house and tied together by the *panda* and set up. Each family which gives the grass is thus protected. Strings of red, yellow and black beads are usually hung about the *chhahur*. They give the household added protection as the *devis* are still more pleased.

12. *Flowers*. Marigold (*Tagetes erecta*), and *Tulasi* (*Ocymum sanctum*) plants are nearly always seen in connection with Kol shrines. The marigold is a sacred plant and is usually found in connection with Hindu worship, while *tulasi* plants are often found there too. At Kaimur, Kali lived in a *tulasi* plant and black bangles were hung upon it to indicate that fact.

13. *Bangles* (*Churi*). Bangles, being a feminine adornment, are always found at Kol shrines. These are usually red, yellow or black in colour, and they seem to be used with discrimination. They may be tied on a pole or on a *nim* tree, or fastened to some part of the furnishings of the shrine.

14. *Vermilion* (*Sendur*). Red lead is very necessary in worship. It was seen how it stimulated Mahabir into action. *Devis* like it, and it is also a devil scarer and helps to protect the shrine.

15. *Mounds* (*Pinda*). It is not infrequently found that there are one or more mounds raised on the mud platform to represent *devis* and to be their dwelling place. These are generally whitewashed once a week. At Kaimur, one was for Khermai and the other for Mari *devi*; at Benda Bhainsokhar was worshipped this way.

16. *Earthenware Vessels* (*Ghara*). These are not always found, but during the hot season are usually hung either in the tree or on a pole over the shrine. Sometimes liquor is kept in them. This is pleasing to the goddesses, especially Kali. Sometimes water is kept

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778 in these vessels, and a tiny hole pierced in the bottom so that the water
[271 drops over the shrine. This is popular in warm weather when the
776] *devi* should be cooled and the dripping water is pleasing to her.

17. *Tinsel* (*Tika*): Women often place a small round dot made
[302] of lac tinsel on the centre of their foreheads. It is usually of red colour. These bits of tinsel are used in the shrines as well, and are stuck on it here and there. The *devis* like them and they help to attract them to the shrine.

18. *Stone* (*Patthar*). Bits of stone, usually pieces rounded in the bed of streams and longish in shape, are often found somewhere about the shrine. This may be an imitation of the *Salagrama* stones found
[831] in connection with the worship of Vishnu. Sometimes they are of *lingam* type such as used in the worship of Siva.

This sums up the items usually found in Kol shrines. Probably no shrine we saw had all these components, though the Kaimur shrine came nearest to it. In addition to the above, there was at Kaimur
[823] an unusual feature. This was a flat stone which had apparently come from some ancient Hindu temple and on which two figures were carved. The *panda* of the shrine claimed that it was brought from Rewa and
[782 that the figures represented Sharda and Kalki. The stone must have
789] weighed about eighty pounds, but, it was claimed, if a *hom* offering were performed when it was moved, it became very light and was
[386] easy to transport. It was coloured red with *sendur*. It will have been noticed how imperfectly anthropomorphized the godlings are, and that no special images are required.

The only Kol shrine which had brick walls and a roof was found on the outskirts of Katni. The room measured about five feet square inside, was four feet high, and had a flat roof. This was called the shrine of Khermai, although on the flat top Barmai was said to dwell.
[824] Also tongs were there for Sannyasi *deo*. The usual bundle of *kusa* grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*) was on top of it.

778 The offerings, the lighting of the lights and the placing of the
793 necessary parts, are all in the hands of the *panda*. It is not part of his work, however, to keep the shrine clean and properly plastered. This is the duty of the women of the village, and they take turns in doing it. The shrine is plastered at least once a week and cleaned oftener. The sweepings, including ashes, dust, bits of cocoanut shells and the like, are not swept to the ground beside the shrine, but are carefully put into a basket by the woman who is doing the work. If they should be thrown out upon the earth, evil will result, so they are carried to a stream or a tank and thrown into the water. They are sacred ashes, likened unto the ashes following a cremation and must be respected.